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The Malayan Landscape Paintings: From Western Representations to Malayan Renditions

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Abstract

Landscape paintings were one of the earliest visual art renditions of the Malay land in Malaysia. Traveller artists who arrived in Malaya and Singapore during the 18th and 19th centuries illustrated various subject matters that they observed. The most common examples included tropical flora and fauna, various views and landscapes, British residences, and so on. The theme of a tremendously fertile land with beautiful natural resources and prosperous economic activities is among the few themes and representations that were drawn or painted by early Malayan artists in the early 20th century. Landscape can be considered the most significant and intrinsic pictorial form in modern Malaysian art, as it was one of the earliest mediums of visual impressions and expressions. This article explores the evolution of the representation of Malaysia in landscape paintings from the early 19th century to mid-20th century by examining selected works and discussing how these artistic renditions reflect the changes that were happening in Malaya, from the types of landscapes produced by British artist-officers to how the British government mooted the Malayan cultural strategy to gain public trust and confidence in their ability to combat insurgency. These could be seen as how art exhibitions and institutions, the encouragement of certain art-production through predominantly featured picturesque and peaceful landscapes, and portrayals that create a sense of calm and tranquillity amidst the violent climate of the Malayan Emergency were intended to alleviate anxieties and provide solace to the public.

Lukisan lanskap merupakan salah satu daripada karya seni visual yang paling awal menggambarkan tanah Melayu di Malaysia. Seniman pengembara yang tiba di Malaya dan Singapura pada abad ke-18 dan ke-19 merakamkan pelbagai subjek yang mereka perhatikan pada masa itu. Contoh yang paling biasa termasuk flora dan fauna tropika, pemandangan dan lanskap yang pelbagai, kediaman British, dan sebagainya. Tema tanah yang sangat subur dengan sumber semulajadi yang indah dan aktiviti ekonomi yang makmur adalah antara tema dan representasi yang dilukis oleh seniman Malaya/Malaysia pada awal abad ke-20. Lanskap boleh dianggap sebagai bentuk lukisan paling penting dan intrinsik dalam seni moden Malaysia, kerana ia merupakan salah satu medium awal untuk kesan dan ekspresi visual. Artikel ini meneliti evolusi representasi Malaya dalam lukisan landskap dari abad ke-19 hingga pertengahan abad ke-20. Artikel ini mengkaji karya-karya landskap yang dipilih dan membincangkan bagaimana hasil seni ini mencerminkan perubahan yang berlaku di Malaya, daripada jenis landskap yang dihasilkan oleh pegawai-seniman British sehingga bagaimana kerajaan British merancang strategi budaya Malaya untuk mendapatkan kepercayaan

dan keyakinan orang ramai dalam keupayaan mereka untuk menangani pemberontakan. Ini boleh dilihat sebagai bagaimana pameran seni dan institusi, menggalakkan pembuatan seni tertentu secara predominan yang lanskap indah dan damai, dan penggambaran yang mencipta rasa ketenangan dan kedamaian di tengah-tengah cuaca darurat yang bergejolak bertujuan untuk mengurangkan kegelisahan dan memberikan ketenangan kepada orang awam.

Keywords: landscape paintings, Malayan Emergency, Malayan art, Malaysian art

Introduction

In Malaysia, landscape paintings were one of the earliest renditions of the Malay land. As noted by Kelvin C. S. Chuah, traveller artists visiting Malaya and Singapore in the 18th and 19th centuries recorded various subject matters that they observed. Common scenes depicted in such artwork included tropical flora and fauna, landscape views, and British residences. Europeans even hired Chinese watercolourists to create art which catered to specific demands (Chuah 2008).

Drawings and paintings of early Malaya (present-day Malaysia) were not a new subject in terms of curatorship. There have been exhibitions, catalogues, and publications covering the subject matter, especially in the context of the early views of Malaya. Books, like *Early Views of Penang and Malacca*, by Laurence Loh Kwong Yu and Ooi Keat Jin (2002) and *Penang Views 1770-1860*, by C. K. Lim (1986), as well as art exhibitions, like *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan dalam Seni Moden Malaysia* (Piyadasa 1981) and *Pameran Pemandangan Malaysia* (BSLN 1990), showcased these early landscape views of Malaysia as produced by Malaysian artists.

Shireen Naziree (2013) points out that the genre of landscape painting is sometimes considered the most significant and intrinsic pictorial form in modern Malaysian art. The theme of a fertile landscape with beautiful natural resources and prosperous economic activities was one of the few themes and representations that were depicted in the early 20th century. These landscape views were produced using a variety of mediums, including sketches and drawings, oil paintings, prints, as well as *batik* - a traditional process of fabric printing in Indonesia and Malaysia. These are some of the mediums used to create the genre of landscapes. Of course, watercolour is the most popular medium for producing landscape paintings, as it facilitates creation of quick sketches as references for later studio paintings or prints (Sabapathy and Piyadasa 1983: 1).

Although early artistic travellers produced such works in this region, later Malayan and Malaysian artists played a crucial role in the construction of an eclectic but pioneering local manifestation of landscape paintings. Among the artists who produced works of this genre were Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Khaw Sia, Tay Hooi Keat, Kuo Ju Ping, Lim Cheng Hoe, A.B. Ibrahim and A.J. Rahman. Works by these artists have often been overlooked in research, because only a few paintings produced before Malaysia's Independence in 1957 survived the war (Piyadasa 1994: 21). Following World War II came the period known as the *Malayan Emergency*, characterized by guerrilla warfare between the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Malayan government between 1948 and 1960. Only limited numbers of paintings were produced during this period, and none were reflective of what Malaya people actually faced during those troubled times.

Among the landscape works by Malaysian artists, common depictions include scenes of fishing and rural villages; riverine scenes; cityscapes; landscapes with mosques, temples, and other buildings;

and landscapes that consist of a few modes of work, various pastime activities, etc.[1] With this context in mind, this paper aims to explore the evolution of Malaya's representation in landscape paintings from the 18th century to mid-20th century, with a particular focus on the period after the 1950s. Our objective is to examine a selected group of landscape depictions and discuss how these artistic renditions reflected changes that were occurring in Malaya up until the mid-20th century. These artworks range from early landscape renditions produced by the traveller artists to the approach and context of landscape paintings produced by local Malayans mid-20th century.

Methodology

In this paper, the exploration of paintings operates within the framework of *new art history*. The approach of "new art history" extends beyond mere analysis of artistic objects, delving into social issues and critical dialogues surrounding art production, encouraging more inclusive, inquisitive, and introspective perspectives in the realm of art history (Harris 2001: 2). Through an examination of artwork, exhibition catalogues, and literature from the 1950s and 1960s, this study contextualises landscape representations within the broader narrative of Malaysian studies, especially in the context of early landscape paintings from the early 19th to the mid-20th century, the period following post-war Malaya. As there were established secondary sources of images produced by artists during that time through catalogues and books, especially on works by traveller artists, the authors only selected a few examples to present in this discussion. As in the landscapes of Malaya up to the mid-20th century, resources were sparse; hence, the author searched various catalogues and books which might not necessarily deal directly with landscape paintings. There are several books on the representation of British Malaya, and some documentation and research on artworks by Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Khaw Sia, Tay Hooi Keat, Kuo Ju Ping, and Lim Cheng Hoe. Research on A.B. Ibrahim and A.J. Rahman is limited. Based on these limitations, we visited the National Art Gallery, private galleries, and personal collectors in order to identify and visually examine some of these landscape works. Following this, we selected thirteen works of art to represent the changing landscape of Malaya.

The Landscape Premise

This paper examines two periods of the presentation of Malayan landscapes, as well as the diverse aspects of landscape representations that gained popularity in Malaysia until the mid-20th century. We scrutinised Victor Savage's approach to landscape painting, despite it being a common genre. Savage considers landscape painting as a "living process" that involves "the total sensually perceptible features of a person's experience at a particular place and time" (Savage 1984: 12-13). He envisions landscape representation as a vibrant and ever-changing view encompassing not only visible elements but also the entirety of an individual's sensory perception and experience within a specific place and time. Therefore, each individual's experience of a landscape is unique, shaped by their subjective perspective, cultural background, memories, and emotions, which evoke different responses and meanings for different individuals.

Landscape paintings are not limited to natural landscapes that cover views of mountains, rivers, seas, swamps, and jungles—Savage also takes into account the cultural landscape that comprises the various signs of human activities, such as settlements, ruins, and transportation networks (Savage 1984: 12-13). Simon Schama writes in his book *Landscape and Memory*, "Before it can ever be the repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much

[1] This is not to suggest that there were no other artworks painted or produced at the time, and other themes were popular as subject matter, such as depictions of local fruits, sea products, domestic utensils, as well as figurative art, such as portraiture and the portrayal of human activities, rituals, etc.

from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (Schama 1995: 6-7). Therefore, a landscape is not simply a collection of natural features, but is the result of human interpretation and interaction with the environment. It is through the lens of memory that landscapes take on deeper narratives.

Landscape paintings, whether created on-site or drawn from memory, reflect artists' experiences of their surroundings. Therefore, we cannot dissociate the landscape paintings and artistic renditions of Malaya from personal experiences of the artists. Landscape paintings are not merely representations of the world around artists; we must read further into them beyond introspective and reflective engagement with the natural world, as there are profound connections between these works through artists' memories and imaginations, and the physical landscapes they depicted. Even landscape taste is not static. Peter Howard has pointed out how, in the works of several European authors, mountain scenery was not considered attractive until the 18th century (1991: 2).

Unlike the issue of taste and impressions discussed above, the possible complexity in terms of landscape genre can be contextualised within the larger study of nation-building. Scholars have argued that landscape representations play an integral role in the (re)construction of "nation" and, relatedly, "national identity." Wen and White (2020), for example, point out that landscape paintings serve as a framework for the construction of national and cultural identities which can offer a complex and multidimensional setting. The identification, analysis, comprehension, and understanding of art historical themes studied through these landscape renditions allows for a deeper reading of these works. Wen and White write:

> … depictions of natural and cultural landscapes can serve the creation of cultural and national identity not solely through the faithful reproduction of what the artist can see, but can also derive their power from artists' reflective engagement with the elements that constitute landscape and from subsequent depictions that are symbolist in kind. (Wen and White 2020)

Kong and Yeoh argue that landscapes naturalise ideologies by making the cultural appear natural, writing:

> The (re)creation of landscapes is therefore unlikely to be an innocent event but must instead be read as being deeply ideological. At the same time, landscapes may be interpreted by people in their everyday lives in ways divergent from the imposed meanings of the dominant. The power relations that define and contests the 'nation' are therefore often played out in and through landscapes. (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 2-3)

Kong and Yeoh assert that physical landscapes, too, embody inherent power dynamics and serve as arenas of contention. They highlight how the notion of the "nation" and power dynamics shaping its definition and boundaries are evident in physical and cultural terrains, subject to both manifestation and contestation. Such spaces, in essence, serve as battlegrounds where struggles for authority and representation of national identity unfold. This suggests that these environments are not impartial; rather, they mirror and contribute to the continual negotiation and manifestation of power dynamics within society (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 2-3). If physical landscapes are active participants and not passive backdrops, in the expression of power relations and ideologies, then a similar argument can be made for the seemingly innocent nature of landscape paintings within the same context.

This paper underscores the necessity of a critical examination of landscape portrayal, particularly within the post-war Malayan context, given the divergent viewpoints. The substantial sociocultural as well as political and economic shifts during this era offer a unique chance to explore a nuanced perspective of landscape representation. Investigating the evolution of landscape art not only enriches our understanding of the artistic domain, it also reveals insights into the broader historical narrative of Malaysia.

In the post-war era, Malaysia witnessed substantial changes that impacted its societal fabric. These changes affected various aspects of Malaysian society, including cultural, social, and economic dimensions. In this context, the study of landscape representations becomes a crucial tool for contextualising these transformations, as landscape paintings act as a visual archive of the nation's development. To do so, the investigation of landscape renditions in Malaysia was divided into two phases: (a) landscape representations from the viewpoint of traveller English Officers, and (b) the context of post-war Malayan landscape paintings produced by Malayan artists and how they began to render their surroundings through both natural and cultural landscapes. Such representations, despite being seen as "innocent," were pertinent, as they were produced during the post-war years and the subsequent Malayan Emergency.

Malayan Landscapes from the Viewpoint of Traveller English Officers

With the opening of Penang to the British as a trading base by the East India Company in 1786, many foreign traders and officials began arriving in the region, and a few of them, during their stay, produced drawings and paintings, some of which were converted into prints. Both *Penang Views 1770-1860* (Lim 1986) and *Early Views of Penang and Malacca 1660-1880* (Loh and Ooi 2002) showcase various early images of Penang and Malacca that were mostly produced by working English travellers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Other collections include the Southeast Asia prints that was published in *Prints of Southeast Asia in the India Office Library* (Bastin and Rohatgi 1979) and *Singapore through 19th Century Prints and Paintings* (Wong 2010). There are publications based on individual works and collections, as can be seen in the works of Frank Swettenham (C. K. Lim 1988) and Charles Dyce (I. Lim 2003).

The early works of art predominantly employed watercolours, oils, drawings, and sketches, with many later reproduced as prints utilising various techniques like engraving, aquatint, and etching. Broadly speaking, the British representation of Malaya can be categorised into two approaches. Initially, during the late 18th century and early 19th century, the focus was on landscapes. These artworks often featured recurring themes, such as prominent land sites, coastal views, elevated perspectives, depictions of buildings and surroundings, and stunning natural landscapes.

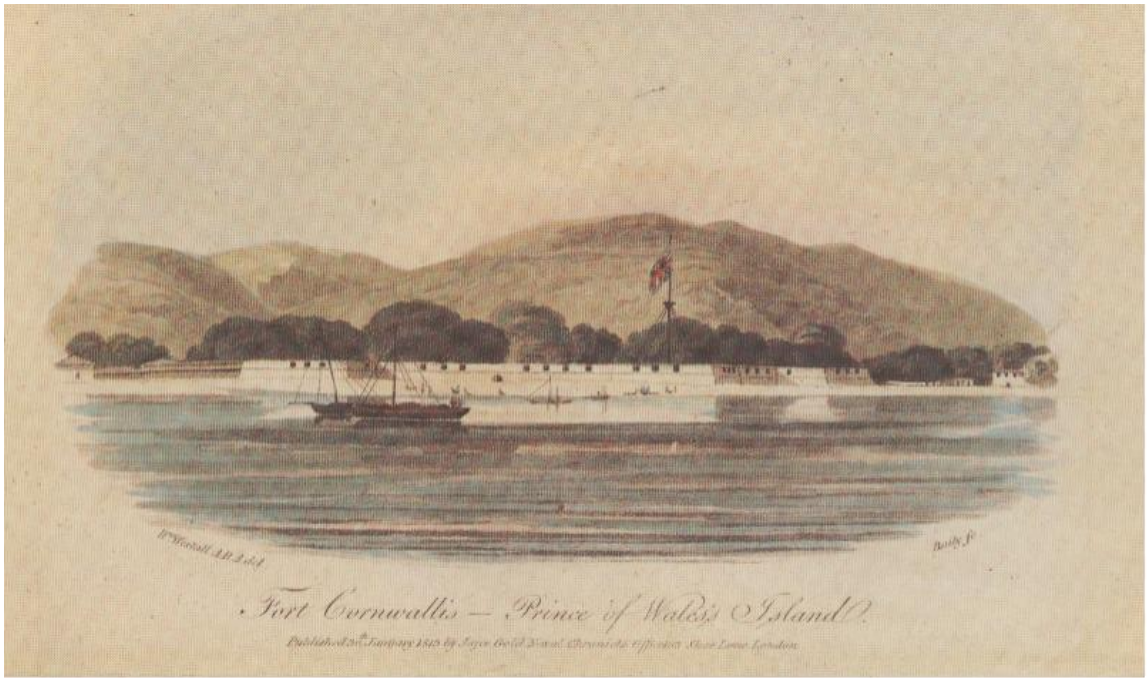

Fig. 1 WILLIAM WESTALL (1781–1850) *Fort Cornwallis, Prince of Wales's Island* (1804).

Engraving 12.8 x 21.0 cm. Courtesy of Penang State Museum.

After the British East India Company established Fort Cornwallis, it became a prominent subject matter. William Westall's engraving, *Fort Cornwallis, Prince of Wale's Island* (1804) (Figure 1), depicts a perspective from a ship viewing the fort from the sea. The image shows the fortification from afar, with the British flag hoisted. The structure is central to the scene, with a mountain behind it and several ships floating in front of it. The artist uses horizontal lines to indicate the sea waves, which occupy the front view of the composition, forming the cultural landscape with the forest and the outline of the hills in the background.

As perspectives from a ship's point of view became a common, views overlooking the coast and sea became equally popular. William J. Huggins' work, *The hon. East India Company's ship, William Fairlie Leaving Penang* (1828), depicts two ships as the subject matter. Consisting of warm, cold, and neutral palettes, we observe *sampans*, the smaller boats, ferrying people from ship to land – their much smaller size contrasting with the enormous ships. In addition to the central positionality of the British East India Company's ship, the artist creates a panoramic view further enhanced by the big white and yellowish sail of William Fairlie, with its vertical masts straight up to the sky, drawing the attention of the viewer.

Another genre evident in landscape renditions is how the scenery of the land, town, and ocean is presented from an elevated position. *Singapore Town from Government Hill looking East* (1846) (Figure 2) is John Turnbull Thomson's painting from a high location in the northern part of colonial Singapore. Thomson arrived in Penang in 1838, and in 1844 he became Superintendent of the Roads and Public Works of Singapore. He did extensive surveys and mapping in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula; his efforts were crucial in establishing land boundaries and for planning infrastructure and urban development in the rapidly growing city-state.

Fig. 2 JOHN TURNBULL THOMSON (1821-1884), *Singapore Town from the Government Hill Looking East* (1846). Watercolour on paper, 27.5 x 44.0 cm. Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, 92/1218. Given by the Hall-Jones family, Invercargill, 1992.

In Thomson's painting, it is apparent how his perspective as a surveyor influenced his depiction. The adaptation to a higher vantage point allowed for detailed observations and assessments that are evident in both of these works, in which he represented notable landmarks. In Figure 2, Thomson depicts St. Andrew's Cathedral near the seafront on the right. To the left side of the cathedral, Thomson depicted the now-demolished Raffles Institution, which ceased to exist in 1972 (John Hall-Jones 1983: 26).

These officers were skilled not only in capturing impressive natural landscapes, but also in depicting buildings and structures as part of the landscape. William Daniell's aquatint *View of Suffolk House, Prince of Wale's Island* (1819) (Figure 3) serves as a clear example. In this work, Daniell demonstrates his artistic prowess by highlighting the architectural details of the colonial mansion and the intricacies of vegetation in the foreground. This attention to local flora suggests his interest in capturing the unique botanical elements of the region. In addition, it is worth noting that, during this period, artwork often minimised the presence of the local populace. If depicted at all, locals were portrayed minuscule in size and not actively participating in the composition. This observation is apparent in the small figures in front of the Suffolk House, which do not assert an active role in the overall landscape composition.

Fig. 3 WILLIAM DANIELL (1769–1837) *View of Suffolk House, Prince of Wale's Island* (after Robert Smith) (1819). Hand coloured aquatint engraving, 56 x 86.5 cm. Courtesy of Penang State Museum.

Impressive natural sites also became a pertinent subject matter. Captain Robert Smith's painting *The Great Tree* (1818) exemplifies this fascination. It portrays an expedition by British officers. Accompanied by their coolie, they set out on a mission to measure the circumference of what was supposedly the largest tree on the island. The artist depicts the men on a significantly smaller scale, in parallel with the Romanticism in Europe in which artists elevated the genre of landscape painting to a higher and more esteemed level, aiming to evoke a sense of the sublime in the viewer—a mixture of awe and terror—showcasing the grandeur and overwhelming presence of nature

compared to the size of the tree itself. Painted in green and yellow ochre, the men create a stark contrast in size, drawing viewer focus to the magnitude of the tree.

This approach to use of colour was influenced by the aesthetics of the early and mid-19th century, reflecting the spirit of Victorian and Romantic styles. Realistically, the paintings should reflect the predominantly lush greenery of the tropical forest in the region. However, they were painted with hues of yellow, ochre, and brown, more reminiscent of autumn scenes in England and evoking a sense of Romanticism. Nevertheless, the spirit of Romanticism that is evident in the works of Captain Robert Smith, James Wathen, W. Daniels, and William Havel began to wane after the 1820s. This shift occurred perhaps for three reasons. Firstly, these European painters began to appreciate the hot, humid, and sticky tropical conditions in Malaya. Secondly, they adapted to the realities of the tropical environment, requiring a new approach to painting. Thirdly, painters started to become active participants rather than mere external observers of the landscape during the latter half of the 19th century. Attention shifted towards specific elements of the Malayan countryside, with a newfound interest in the native inhabitants, Malay architecture, modes of transportation, and everyday life.

View in Pulo Penang or Prince Edwards' Island (1828) (Figure 4) demonstrates this change of attitude. In this work, Augustus Earle depicts the scene of a marketplace with a group of locals. It must be noted, however, that the East India Company brought with them the Brigade of Gurkhas, who originally served the East India Company and later the British Indian Army prior to Indian independence (Khalidi 2001). What could be the possible scenery at Fort Cornwallis? Earle used a linear perspective to reproduce the scenery of the lives of people in this early township. On the left, an Indian man holding an umbrella talks to a sentry in front of a house. People appear to be engaged in trading activities. Five men are seated on the ground and chatting. The houses, tropical trees, and mountains in the background create a sense of width and depth for the audience. As this painting was produced early in the 19th century, the colour treatment is similar to the Romantic approach highlighted earlier, except for the way in which the artist created a view of a town in Penang with more intimacy, showing people.

Fig. 4 AUGUSTUS EARLE (1793-1838) *View in Pulo Penang or Prince Edwards' Island* (1828). National Library of Australia. Rex Nan Kivell Collection NK12/122.

As previously discussed regarding works by John Turnbull Thomson (Figure 2), some early drawings and sketches by English officers began demonstrating a shift in subject interest towards documenting the region. Another notable example of this attitude can be observed through the sketches and water colours of Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham (1850-1946). Swettenham served as the first Resident General of the Federated Malay States (FMS), from 1896 to 1901. During his leisure time in Malaya, he engaged in sketching and watercolour painting, which also served as a form of documentation, albeit unofficial, capturing private moments which offer insight into how colonial administrators perceived their territories in 19th-century Malaya (Abdullah 2022b).

Swettenham's sketches and watercolour paintings presented the environment and evolving landscapes across Malaya. He utilised watercolours for convenience, allowing him to carry the necessary materials on his travels. These artworks not only demonstrate his artistic talent but also serve as a means to record the changing scenery and his experiences. Swettenham's sketches and watercolours offer a unique perspective of colonial perceptions of Malaya during the 19th century, providing valuable evidence of the landscape and environment seen through the eyes of a colonial administrator, shedding light on cultural, social, and geographical aspects of Malaya during that era.

The context of post-War Malayan landscape paintings

During the Japanese Occupation, from 1941 to 1945, and the subsequent Malayan Emergency, the Malayan people endured intense violence, atrocities, and horrific encounters. Despite these circumstances, several artists managed to produce works during these crucial years, although only a limited number survived.[2] In the first half of the 20th century, and increasingly in the 1950s and 1960s, production of three main types of subject matter were prominent, including portraitures, still life arrangements, and landscape paintings.

Figure compositions provided a means to explore the complexities of human form and character. Still-life arrangements offered artists the opportunity to arrange and depict various objects in a controlled setting. Such compositions often included everyday objects, such as fruit, flowers, utensils, and other household items, inviting viewers to appreciate beauty found in the mundane. Nevertheless, portraitures and still life arrangements are beyond the scope of this paper, so the following discussion will focus on the context of renditions of landscapes in Malaya.

Malaysian artists increasingly began to capture their surroundings. In his discussion of early watercolour paintings by several pioneering Malaysian artists, Piyadasa noted the influence of Victorian models on their works. Watercolour was still a popular medium, with its fluidity and ability to allow artists to evoke a sense of atmosphere and depict the ever-changing moods and colours of landscapes. This is clearly demonstrated by the use of opaque transparency, fluid washes, and the rendering of warm and cool colours reminiscent of British watercolourists. The majority of these landscapes adhere to Western conventions in terms of structuring space by distinguishing the foreground, midground, and background. Victorian influence is unsurprising, considering that Malaysia was under British rule during that era (Redza Piyadasa 2015: 29–30).

After the Japanese occupation (1942-1945), the British authorities returned to Malaya. This period was followed by declaration of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). Despite the British attitude of non-involvement in Malaya's religion and culture, this was the first time that the British, through Templer, espoused to win "the hearts and minds of the people" (Cloake 1985: 477) with a clear

[2] For example, Liu Kang stored about 200 artworks in a school in Singapore in 1942, but when he returned in 1945, all of his works had gone missing without a trace (Sabapathy 2018: 48).

cultural approach. This was an addition to the effective intelligence strategy led by the Malayan Police Special Branch against the political aims of the guerrilla movement (Leon Comber 2008). As stability through economy, society, and politics was pertinent for continuation of British interests in the region, the merger of these shared territories (Malaya, Singapore, and Borneo) could not be achieved by a political amalgamation alone. Tan Tai Yong points out how the mooting of a shared cultural identity, i.e. Malayan culture, had to be created as well, by tying it to local initiatives and interests in Singapore and Malaya (Tan 2003: 145).

As previously mentioned, only limited artworks were produced during the war, but art activities picked up again after the British returned to Malaya, particularly in Singapore. Nevertheless, the discourse on Malayan culture was not limited to visual arts, as also included other forms of art, such as drama, dance, music, painting, and literature.[3] In addition to these, the British established the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) to produce propaganda films. Although the MFU did not have a particularly anti-communist emphasis, when the Malayan Emergency was declared in 1948, "visual" propaganda was seen as a direct and receptive form of Anglo-American modernisation ideology. These films were dubbed and captioned in various languages. Hee Wai Siam emphasised the goal of instilling a sense of Malayan consciousness and identity among people of diverse ethnic backgrounds as a means to counter the threat of communist ideology.[4]

In comparison to Penang, Singapore's art activities had early institutionalisation and support through establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and other art associations. Seng Yujin discusses how the Singapore Art Society (SAS), established in 1954, can be seen as playing a role in shaping public perception through art activities. He argued that the SAS, as part of British government efforts to gain public confidence in their ability to combat the insurgency, organised art exhibitions and facilitated art discussions. The picturesque and serene landscapes mostly depicted in artworks exhibited by SAS, and portrayal of everyday activities such as villagers pounding rice, provided a sense of calmness and tranquillity amid the climate of violence during the Malayan Emergency. It can be argued that these artistic representations aimed to alleviate anxiety and soothe the minds of the public (Seng 2007).

The establishment of SAS marked a departure from the conventional ethnic-based art societies prevalent at the time. Unlike the Chinese, Indian, and Malay art societies, which primarily focused on promoting their respective cultures, the SAS, Seng Yujin argues, adopted a more inclusive approach. It actively sought the involvement of members from various ethnic-based art societies, art academies, teaching institutions, and other culturally-related organisations. The diverse range of SAS programmes, exhibitions, and initiatives reflected this inclusivity. Society became a platform where artists from different backgrounds could come together, exchange ideas, and collaborate on artistic endeavours. Seng Yujin asserts that the SAS transformed into an institutional body capable of representing the interests and aspirations of Singapore's diverse art community. Moreover, the close partnership between SAS and the British Council during this time exemplified the broadening of British involvement in the arts and culture domain (Seng 2007: 11).

Singapore became the focal point for discourse and discussions of cultural identity during the 1950s (Sabapathy 2010: 8). This was further consolidated by establishment of the University Art Museum, in 1954, with Michael Sullivan as both curator and art historian. Along a similar vein, the museum

[3] For more background, particularly in the context of literature in Singapore, see Quah S. R. (2020).
[4] According to Hee, one of the strategies involved creating films that amplified the modern amenities of the New Villages and the joy experienced by their residents (Hee 2020: 193). Hee further pointed out that during the Cold War, Chinese people were presented with the choice of being either a good Malayan or a communist (Hee 2020: 187, 199).

aimed "to bring together a representative collection of the art of those civilisations that have chiefly contributed to the creation of Malayan culture" (Sabapathy 2010: 6).

Kuala Lumpur witnessed a flourishing art scene during the 1950s, with the arrival of Peter Harris, a British artist and educator. Harris assumed the role of first Superintendent of the Arts for the Federation of Malaya, marking a pivotal moment as it was the first time a dedicated education officer had actively promoted art education in the region. Harris made a remarkable impact on the development of art in Malaysia. In addition to providing art education to local teachers, he further established a renowned evening drawing class, known as the Wednesday Art Group (WAG). This group played a vital role in nurturing talented Malaysian artists from diverse racial backgrounds who subsequently gained recognition in the art world (Abdullah 2010: 142-145). In Kuala Lumpur, this was followed by establishment of the multiracial Malayan Arts Council, which became the working committee that set up the National Art Gallery (NAG) in 1958, a year after Malaya's independence. This exemplifies the importance of larger multiracial frameworks in the context of the promotion of art during that era. Series of international exhibitions followed suit, reflecting how the idea of Malayan identity began taking place in the context of art exhibitions (Abdullah 2022).

It must be recognized how landscape paintings played a significant role during this time. Unlike the matter discussed in the previous section, in which landscape productions enlightened us on how British officers and travellers viewed the world around them, landscape paintings by local artists shed light on the cultural, social, geographic, and economic aspects of Malaya from the perspective of the local population. Seng Yujin asserts that, in response to Malayan Communist Party attempts to incite violence through strikes and riots, the British government convinced the people of Malaya that the British could provide security and stability. As a result, representations of peaceful streets and idyllic village life became sought-after subjects among artists during the tumultuous period of the early 1950s. Seng Yujin points out how works by Malayan artists consistently captured serene atmospheres and offered solace amidst turmoil and bloodshed, which resonated deeply with the people of Malaya (Seng 2007: 12).

Therefore, we can observe how these "innocent" works of art can be argued as a form of iteration of how the British could ensure a sense of security and stability in Malaya. This is emphasised by Kong and Yeoh, who argue that

> … landscape features as a major strand running through both the imaginary and material body of the "nation". They represent landscapes borne of different socialcultural projects and illustrate varied relationships between people and landscape – from the taken for granted to those of intimate significance, from the private to the public, from functional to the iconic. (Kong and Yeoh 2003: 4-5)

Although Kong and Yeoh address the aspect of physical landscapes, the depiction of landscapes in paintings and drawings can be argued as not merely representations of natural beauty but can also be read and contextualised in respective socio-cultural settings, serving as prominent threads woven through the conceptual and tangible fabric of the 'nation'.

Returning to the context of the counter-insurgency from 1948 to 1960 and the mooted Malayan culture, we observe that despite the extremely troubling period in Malaysia, landscape paintings illustrating tranquillity and Malaya's development, modernisation, and economic importance became favoured subject matters. For example, the early works of Khalil Ibrahim represent idyllic village scenes, despite the reality of the Malayan Emergency at that time. In *Kampung Landscape* (1955) (Figure 5), Ibrahim employed a vibrant yellow hue, complemented by touches of purple and

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blue to represent the sky. The vivid yellow background creates a striking contrast to the two houses and coconut trees, conveying the ambience of a village at sunset.

Fig. 5 KHALIL IBRAHIM (1934-2018) *Kampung Landscape* (1955). Oil on canvas, 30 x 44.5 cm. Private collection.

Besides such local vistas, other subject matters of landscape paintings were produced, especially in the form of what Kong and Yeoh term *economic landscape* paintings. These include scenes of economic activities, such as ports with junk boats and ships, tin mining, and agricultural activities. Similar to the British, Malayan artists explored recurring themes of coastal views, but this time in a more intimate manner – among the subject matters include the ships and activities happening around ports. However, the approach taken by Malayan artists differed in that they portrayed these subjects in a close-up manner, capturing perspectives from the land. This difference allowed for a more intimate portrayal of the coastal scenes, emphasising the connection between the viewers and the bustling maritime activities.

Yong Mun Sen's *Junkboat* (1950) (Figure 6) presents a bustling trading port. The background shows groups of junk ships, although – in Yong Mun Sen's distinctive style – these are portrayed in less detail. The focal point is the ship positioned in the centre, dominating the composition in terms of size and centrality. People aboard the ship are rendered in minimal detail, suggesting their presence without delving into intricacies. The depiction of the ocean conveys a sense of calmness, with gentle waves and indications of a sunny day portrayed through a bright and clear sky. The substantial size of the junk ship, which occupies nearly half of the painting, reflects the artist's instinctual approach rather than strict adherence to academic training.

Fig. 6 YONG MUN SEN (1896 – 1962) *Junkboat* (1950). Watercolour, 37 x 54.5 cm.
Courtesy of Dato' Tan Chee Khuan.

Singapore River (Figure 7), painted by Lim Cheng Hoe, showcases skilful use of the wet-on-wet technique to create a soft and fluid atmosphere throughout the artwork. The painting evokes a sense of tranquillity, inviting viewers to appreciate the beauty and serenity of the Singapore River, with silhouettes of buildings in the background. The composition of the painting is neatly divided into two sections, with the river occupying the lower half. A distinct row of dark boats acts as a horizontal division, but the symmetry is broken by the presence of a *sampan* boat in the foreground and a glimpse of the riverbank in the lower right corner, which are depicted in greater detail, creating a sense of depth and enhancing the overall perspective. In the background, buildings are depicted with vague washes of warm grey, fading into the distance.

Fig. 7 LIM CHENG HOE (1912–1979) *Singapore River* (1962). Watercolour on paper, 33 x 43 cm.
Collection of National Gallery of Singapore.

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Malaya was one of the most profitable territories under the British Empire, being the world's largest producer of tin, and later of rubber. Therefore, it is no surprise that the British would want to ensure Malaya's security and stability, meaning the British urgently needed to retain power against the Malayan Communist Party during the Malayan Emergency. Both of these artists' watercolour renderings of tin mine landscapes reflect the natural resource that piqued the interest of the British in Malaya (Siddiqui 2012). Historically, the tin industry was a major pillar of the Malaysian economy and propelled economic development in the Malay Peninsula (Gin 2001).

The paintings *Bumi yang Bahagia Lombong Bijih Timah* (*The Good Land-Malayan Tin Mines*) (1960) (Figure 8) and *Tin Mining* (1960), by Abdullah Ariff, exemplify an idealised concept of the abundance found in the land of Malaya, showcasing its potential for wealth and prosperity. Both paintings depict the process of tin collection. In *The Good Land-Malayan Tin Mines*, the artist positions three workers in the bottom left corner of the painting, accompanied by timber buildings on the right, while the middle ground captures the expansive scene of the entire tin mine. This work portrays the tin mine scene with a warm colour palette achieved through wet-on-wet watercolour technique. Conversely, *Tin Mining* provides a close-up view of a similar scene, presenting more intricate details of the mine. In this composition, two workers are depicted at the bottom right, walking towards the centre of the painting, while three workers on the left engage in their mining tasks with unwavering focus. Abdullah Ariff skilfully manipulated the opacity and transparency of the pigments, seamlessly shaded to create an illusion of depth. The flow of the composition guides viewers' eyes towards the centre, with meticulous attention to detail. Notably, the two workers depicted at the bottom right attract the viewer's gaze, leading towards the three workers on the left, ultimately drawing attention to the slope of the mine.

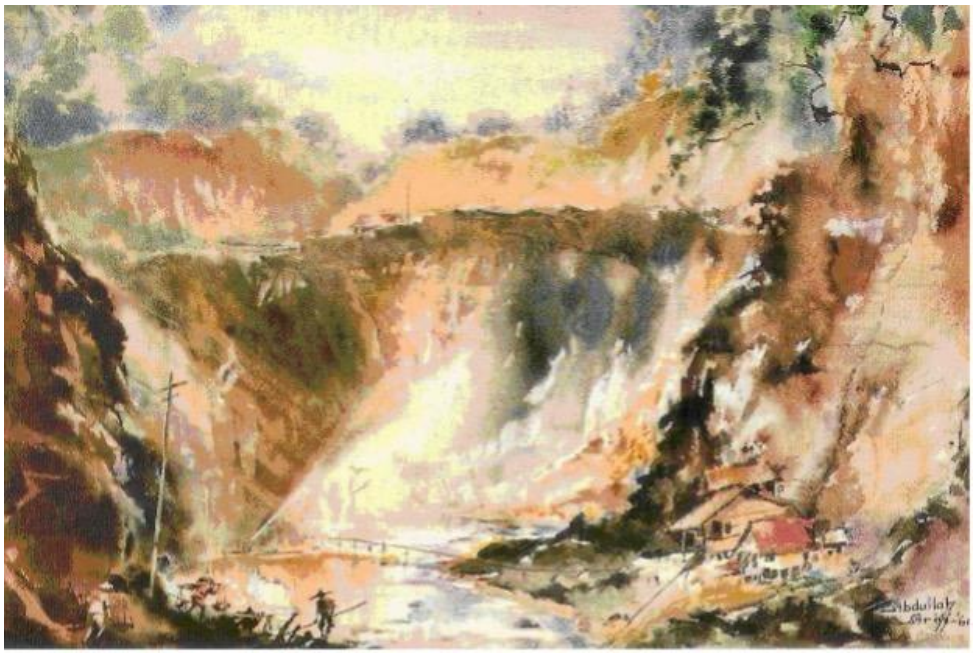

Fig. 8 ABDULLAH ARIFF (1904-1962) *Bumi yang Bahagia Lombong Bijih Timah* (*The Good Land-Malayan Tin Mines*) (1960). Watercolour on paper, 60 x 75.5 cm. BSLN 1961.003 (Sabapathy 1994: 124).

Other than the natural beauty of the Malayan land and busy ports, agricultural landscape was also chosen by artists as a subject matter. Yong Mun Sen's *The Harvester* (1948) (Figure 9) depicts a group of four workers engaged in the act of reaping rice paddy. On the right side, a woman clad in a headscarf and sarong stands with a sickle, ready to harvest grain. To convey a sense of serenity to the viewer, Yong Mun Sen employed repetitive brushstrokes in various directions throughout the paddy field, creating a rhythmic pattern. The deliberate use of warm colours evokes a feeling of

harmony and tranquillity. In contrast, the sky is portrayed with a cool colour scheme, featuring tonal contrasts of white and blue.

Fig. 9 YONG MUN SEN (1896 – 1962) *The Harvesters* (1948). Watercolour, 56 x 78 cm. Courtesy of Dato' Tan Chee Khuan.

Fig. 10 MOHD HOESSEIN ENAS (1924 –1995) *Memetik Daun Tembakau di Kelantan* (*Plucking Up Tobacco Leaves in Kelantan*) (1962). Oil on canvas, 114 x 140 cm. BSLN1962.021(H). (Dawa et al. 2008: 208) National Art Gallery Collection, gifted by Malayan Tobacco.

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Mohd Hoessein Enas' *Memetik Daun Tembakau di Kelantan (Plucking Up Tobacco Leaves in Kelantan)* (1962) (Figure 10) captures a lively daytime scene set in a tobacco field, showing three delightful Malay girls. The artist skilfully portrays the girls' beauty through their charming facial expressions, accompanied by warm smiles. It can be observed how the artist strategically used various techniques to emphasise the importance of the subject within the composition and draw attention to the surrounding landscape. By controlling the use of different media, the artist directs our focus towards the girls while also highlighting the natural beauty of the scenery behind them. The *batik* sarong worn by the girls plays a significant role in accentuating their prominence. The intricate patterns and textures of the *batik* fabric, along with the presence of tobacco leaves, add depth and visual impact to the artwork.

Significantly, urban landscapes and modern amenities were likewise painted by these artists. *Market Place* (1955) (Figure 11), by Abdullah Ariff, portrays a bustling market scene in Malaya during the 1950s. The artist directs our attention to the prominent fruit stalls which are central to activity as people navigate the scene, engaging in conversations and transactions. Adding to the dynamic atmosphere, a trishaw driver on the right side of the painting patiently waits for potential passengers. The presence of the trishaw driver not only adds a sense of movement but also provides a glimpse into the daily lives and services available within the market vicinity. Abdullah Ariff's meticulous attention to detail and observational skills are evident in this artwork, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the vibrant ambience of the market. Through the use of watercolour, the artist captures the lively colours and energy of the scene, evoking realism and authenticity. *Market Place* not only showcases Abdullah Ariff's artistic ability, but also serves as a visual documentation of a specific period.

Fig. 11 ABDULLAH ARIFF (1904-1962) *Market Place* (1955). Watercolour, 37 x 55 cm.
Courtesy of Dato' Tan Chee Khuan.

In another work with a similar approach, Kuo Ju Ping crafted a captivating pastel work entitled *General Hospital, Penang* (1955) (Figure 12). Employing naturalistic colours and skilful technique, the artist meticulously portrays the General Hospital in Penang. The composition's focal point gains depth from a magnificent towering tree, prominently standing in front of the hospital. This tree not only captivates visually, it also creates a sense of distance, pushing the hospital to the back of the picture. The artist's sharp attention to detail captures a lively scene of people moving in and out of the hospital, illustrating the daily activities unfolding within its walls. The overall scene depicted emanates energy and vibrancy. The bright, sunny day adds warmth to the atmosphere, accentuating the bustling environment of the hospital. Kuo Ju Ping's artistic portrayal offers a glimpse into the dynamics of the General Hospital during the 1950s, where medical professionals, patients, and visitors intersected in a bustling ecosystem.

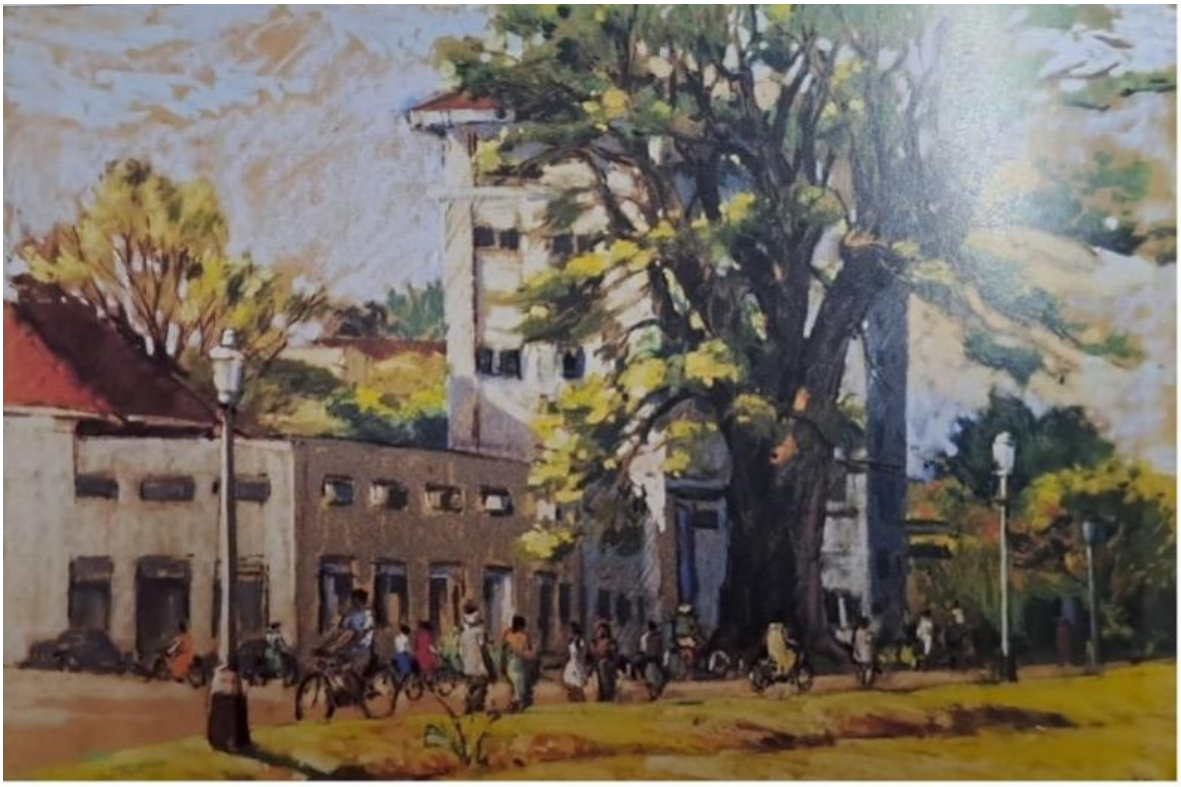

Fig. 12 KUO JU PING (1908-1966) *General Hospital, Penang* (1955). Pastel, 37 x 55 cm.
Courtesy of Dato' Tan Chee Khuan.

It must be noted that during these early years, landscape paintings were sometimes mass produced, such as outputs by artists like Ibrahim bin Abu Bakar, also known as A.B. Ibrahim. His watercolour paintings subtly portray inherent beauty, the identity of the community, and a peaceful atmosphere (Figure 13). After ten years in this field, A.B. Ibrahim ventured into the mass production of his works. In order to produce a large quantity of art, he painted dozens of identical landscapes at the same time, akin to factory production. He would prepare seven or eight canvases, then paint clouds and water on all of them. Then he would paint trees and add leaves, and once they were dry, he would add houses. He applied finishing touches and signed all the paintings, which were basically identical, before the sellers arrived. He converted his home into a studio and devoted time to the hectic mass production process to meet customer demand. Approximately 20,000 of his artworks are exhibited internationally, including in Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, the United States, Singapore, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Qatar, Hong Kong, and France.

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Fig. 13 Ibrahim bin Abu Bakar (1925-1977). (Not titled). Circa 1960s-1970s. Watercolour, 36 x 27 cm. Private collection.

Conclusion

Landscape painting in Malaysia serves as a valuable lens through which to explore the intertwined threads of Malayan identity, beauty of nature, and colonial influence across different periods. The discussions of the works in this paper capture the allure of Malaysia's landscapes while revealing underlying socio-political dimensions that influenced their production. Beginning with traveller artists, such as William Westall, John Turnbull Thomson, William Daniell and Augustus Earle, who first documented the region's tropical environment and thriving economic activities, landscape paintings became both an artistic response to and a reflection of Malaya's evolving image, framed by colonial, and later nationalist, perspectives.

As Malaysian landscape art developed, it evolved into more than a simple documentation of place; it became an active participant in shaping public perception and fostering a sense of identity. This evolution highlights the dynamic role that art has played in constructing and presenting images of a peaceful, prosperous Malaya, particularly in contrast to the unrest of the mid-20th century. This was discussed earlier, as illustrated through the works by Abdullah Ariff, Ibrahim Abu Bakar Khalil Ibrahim, Kuo Ju Ping, Lim Cheng Hoe, Mohd Hoessein Enas, and Yong Mun Sen. Ultimately, landscape painting's transformation over time demonstrates its role as both a mirror to Malaysian society and a subtle yet powerful form of cultural expression which captures the shifting ideologies and aspirations within the nation's history.

As this paper has shown, by studying landscape representations within the larger context of Malayan/Malaysian history, it allows us to uncover alternative narratives and perspectives. Rather than uncertainty, most of these landscape paintings reflect the security and economic stability of Malaya that the British wanted to exude. One could argue that the artistic focus and interests of

Malayan artists were largely shaped by their immediate surroundings and observations. However, it is essential to consider the influence of selection processes for exhibitions. The inclusion of these landscape images in early Malayan and Singaporean art exhibitions suggests an encouragement of particular representations of Malaya, emphasizing themes that aligned with certain cultural or political narratives.

It must be highlighted that, as argued in this paper, the nuanced reading of landscape representation expands our understanding beyond aesthetic appreciation. It enables us to examine the complexities of post-war Malaysia and delve into the struggles, aspirations, and socio-political dynamics that shaped the nation. By critically examining the development of landscape paintings, we gain insight into the broader context of art production and its significance as a reflection and negotiation of national history by unravelling the intricate layers of meaning, ideology, and historical narratives embedded within these artistic representations.

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